

# Strategies of Marxist Cultural Interpretation

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□—*This essay distinguishes ten approaches to the methodology for the interpretation of cultural texts and messages within the terrain of Marxist theory. By analyzing concrete exemplars of each position, the essay presents each ap-*

*proach as a strategic response to two issues: the nature of significance, and the relationship between culture (signifying practices) and society (structures of power and domination).*

THERE IS a growing recognition and acceptance of what is often euphemistically called "critical" or "materialist" theories of communication and culture. If we are to believe the cumulative description offered in *Ferment in the Field* (Gerbner, 1983), we have not advanced very far since Lazarsfeld first introduced the conflict between administrative and critical research into the canonical constitution of the discipline. First, each side is still attacked as if it held the same positions and faced the same theoretical quagmires as when Lazarsfeld attempted a liberal rapprochement between them. Second, each side continues to attack the other as if the "enemy" were a monolithic, theoretical, methodological and political monster. Third, and most importantly, each side often presents itself in similarly monolithic terms, ignoring not only their dif-

ferences, but the contributions that such differences make to their alliance. The origins of such "reductionist" strategies are complex. To be sure, they are a risk of any interdisciplinary endeavor, and they seem, too often, to be the almost inevitable effects of the self-nominations, "science" and "marxism."

Given the increasingly confusing proliferation of models for marxist communications research, it should be useful to document some of the differences that exist. There are, however, a number of ways to divide the terrain; the framework constitutes as well as describes the differences. Positions are "necessarily" misrepresented because they respond to different issues. The framework I propose focuses on the practice of interpreting specific messages or cultural forms, rather than centering on any theory per se. On the other hand, I will "read" such practices as responses to two related theoretical questions: (1) the politics of textuality, and (2) the problematic of cultural studies.

The politics of textuality signals the changing meaning and function of the category "text" (or "message"), both within everyday life and in the specific

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work of intellectuals. The analysis of the functions<sup>1</sup> of a text depends in part on how one conceptualizes the nature of signifying practices and structures, and their relations to processes of creativity, determination and interpretation. In more traditional marxist terms, the interpretation of texts also depends upon how and where they are inserted into the circuit of production and consumption. These terms are reproduced in a model of communication as the circuit of the exchange of meanings, information or signifiers. Consequently, the investigation of the text is divided into questions of encoding—the relation between production and text—and decoding—the relation between text and consumption or reception.

The second issue, the *problematic of cultural studies*, concerns the division between culture and society within the social formation. It questions the difference, as well as the relations, between signifying and nonsignifying practices. The "culture/society" couplet brings together the Chicago School pragmatists, marxist models of base and superstructure, and contemporary theories of ideology and power. In fact, there is a third term implicit in the question: not only cultural meaning (forms, practices, etc.) and social structures (processes, forces, etc.), but also experience or the domain of everyday life. This third term slides between culture and society. Williams (1958) identifies the ambiguity in the concept of culture, although he then projects it into the social. Culture refers to both the anthropologically constituted notion (with its liberal democratic politics) of a "whole way of life," and the critical humanistic notion (with its sharply demarcated class politics) of a special set of signifying activities. The latter can be "cleansed" of its inherent elitism by broadening the institutional

sites of such practices beyond the narrow domain of art to include the entire range of "ideological state apparatuses" (Althusser, 1970/1971); in other words, the forms and practices of interpersonal and mediated communications.

Just as the question of textuality creates an analytical, if not theoretical, gap between encoding and decoding, the problematic of cultural studies produces a gap between culture and society in describing how particular structures of meaning determine or are determined by social processes. The task apparently requires both a hermeneutics of faith and a hermeneutics of suspicion (Ricoeur, 1965/1970). The latter sees the text determined by a context and functioning in part to hide that determination. The former treats the text as transcending that context, its message potentially universal. A "hermeneutics of faith" interprets the meaning or message of a text; it reaches into literary, symbolic and semiotic theory. A "hermeneutics of suspicion" connects that meaning to a determinate context; it must already have described the social realm, and the organization of power and domination within it. The intersection of these two hermeneutics defines the "ideological function" of the text and it is often in terms of "ideology" that the problematic of cultural studies is theorized.

The questions of the politics of textuality and the problematic of cultural studies, taken together, provide one way of defining the task of marxist interpretation: to describe (and intervene in) the way messages are produced by, inserted into, and function within the everyday lives of concrete human beings so as to reproduce or transform structures of power and domination. I will describe ten different positions (organized into three larger categories or approaches) to the study of cultural texts or communica-

tive messages coexisting within the space of a marxist theory.<sup>2</sup> For each position I will briefly describe its methodological practice and the (often implicit) theoretical responses to the two questions described above. While I will provide at least one example of an interpretation for each position, the mix of abstract and concrete analysis will vary depending upon the availability and accessibility of the work. I will conclude with a schematic summary of this admittedly partial and oversimplified map of the marxist terrain.

### THE CLASSICAL APPROACH

Under this heading, I describe three different positions sharing a number of assumptions: *false consciousness*, *critical theory* and *economism*. All three positions seek to find direct relations between cultural texts and social/economic realities. Not surprisingly, they often find intentional and malevolent voices speaking in the messages, voices seeking to protect their own positions of power and economic domination. Thus, we might describe all three as "reflection" or causal theories. Finally, such classical positions describe both the social and cultural practices of capitalism in terms largely derived from Marx's earlier, humanistic rhetoric: Capitalism creates false needs; modern experience is built upon standardization, the sensationalization of everyday life, dehumanization, escapism, and fragmented if not false understandings of the world. Both the economic interests behind particular texts and the processes of production are always hidden.

Classical approaches, then, never question textuality. The text is assumed to be a transparent medium, or it is erased, or it is simply a conduit which

determines the necessary modes of its own consumption. A confrontation with the text is strategically avoided by bracketing decoding processes. Such analyses focus on the relationship between the producer and the text, implying that consumers are passive and unaware of the ways in which messages act upon them. Mass communication becomes a process of the self-colonization of the individual. Culture cannot be the site of a struggle for power unless there are radically alternative and competing economic and political systems of media production. The result is that change can only occur through action upon the economic and political systems which determine the media messages.

### False Consciousness

This position assumes that texts are collections of images that can be extracted from the text and treated as isolated, ideological representations of reality; that is, they are motivated by and function to protect the class interests already structured into the economic relations of capital. How the critic reads this meaning/ideology in the text is mystified within the critical practice and there is no consideration of how the critic is able to escape the ideological machinations of the text. These meanings are then projected back into the processes of production (as intentions) and forward into the everyday lives of its audience. The unexamined practice of text-interpretation defines both the origin and effects of the text.

Perhaps the most compelling and important example of this approach is Dorfman and Mattelart's *How to Read Donald Duck* (1971/1975). They interpret the comics as a series of image-codes which organize and define the characters and the relations amongst them. Using

techniques as diverse as semiotics and psychoanalysis, the authors describe the structures of social identity and social relationships that constitute the world of Donald Duck. They assume that these meanings are found in the text by its diverse Latin American audiences. The text becomes a simple link between the producer and the consumer. The meanings "transmitted" by the text are placed there by the producers and directly determine their own reception in ways which support the interests of the producers. The text, then, is determinately univocal. For example, they argue that the comic texts consistently re-present a particular familial politics predicated upon an absent father (and an absent mother), creating a relationship between international capitalism and imperialism on the one hand, and familial and gender politics on the other.

Their reading is based on two assumptions: (1) that people take the media to be a realistic representation of reality which then reflects back onto it to reproduce systems of distorted knowledge (ideology); and (2) that people consume such messages by a determined and direct identification with a single (set of) character(s). For example, their interpretation is predicated on the child's identification with his (the authors do not seem to acknowledge the importance of the gendered determination of consumption) counterpart in the comics. Their practice is manifested and exhibited in the conclusions they draw throughout the text:

It is the manner in which the U.S. dreams and redeems itself, and then imposes that dream upon others for its own salvation. (p. 95)

The bourgeois concept of entertainment, and the specific manner in which it is expounded in the world of Disney, is the superstructural

manifestation of the dislocations and tensions of an advanced capitalist historical base. In its entertainment, it automatically generates certain myths functional to the system. It is altogether normal for readers experiencing the conflicts of their age from within the perspective of the imperialist system, to see their own daily life, and projected future, reflected in the Disney system. . . . Behind the Coca Cola stands a whole structure of expectations and models of behavior, and with it, a particular kind of present and future society, and an interpretation of the past. (Dorfman & Mattelart, 1979/1975, p. 97)

This ability to, as Blake might say, "see the world in a grain of sand," is based on a vision of the culture/society couplet as a system of reflexes, moving from the base to the superstructure, through the audience, and returning to the base. Thus, the complex and necessary ideological mechanisms of economic and political domination are "part of the metabolism of the system" (p. 56).<sup>3</sup>

It may be useful to provide a second, more widely accessible example of this approach—Gitlin's *The Whole World is Watching* (1980). Gitlin examines how the "routine practices" of news organizations define the structures of, and possibilities for, the production of news messages. Although Gitlin's theoretical framework suggests a "hermeneutic" position built upon Williams (1973) and Gramsci (1971), his methodological practice contradicts this. Like other classical positions, he assumes that the media have the power to "orchestrate everyday consciousness" (p. 2) in rather unproblematic ways, and that the structures of meaning which the media impose upon the audience can be simply read off the surface of the texts themselves. Ideology is "distributed by the media, which 'bring a manufactured public world into private life' (p. 1). Although he argues that critics must pay

attention to the symbolic contents of the media before questions of concrete effects can be raised, Gitlin assumes that the texts are univocal. Consequently, he is not compelled to offer any theory of how one is to discover the "frames" within which the media place events. They are there, on the surface, available to anyone who looks for them, that is, that has the proper political awareness. But most importantly, Gitlin's analysis of the ideological encoding in news production, raises questions of its consumption. While he wants to allow for an active audience, that activity is limited to the ability to disagree with the ways in which media have framed a particular event, or to respond to the textual framing in future activities. The frames are the meaning of the text, and they apparently determine the terms within which the audience can respond to the message, either in sympathy or in opposition. That frames themselves may take on different functions, or that audiences may respond to the messages according to an alternative reading of the encoded frames, does not enter into his argument.

### Critical Theory

The work of the Frankfurt School has, for a number of reasons, been one of the most influential interpretations of marxism in communication studies. Critical theory sees cultural texts as an imposition of the categories of mass production onto the domain of consciousness, imagination and thought. That is, the text becomes a conduit through which practices of production determine practices of consumption. The text is critically evaluated in terms of the ways in which it demands to be consumed. Thus, once again, the relations between encoding

and decoding, and between society and culture, are assumed to be simple reflexes or reflections.

This can be seen most clearly in Adorno's (1941) discussions of popular music. This critique, typical of the Frankfurt School, is enacted in ways that are qualitatively different from the analysis of "art." Adorno condemns mass or popular music as a standardized industrial product (commodity) which determines an infantilized (fetishized) mode of consumption. He acknowledges that, while the manufacturing, distribution and marketing of the music are industrialized, the production itself must retain some artisanal character, but this merely functions as a rationalization of the music's commodification; it provides the illusion of individuality and masks its standardization. This contrasts sharply with Adorno's modernist vision of art as a transcendental, autonomous activity which, by projecting utopian possibilities, opens up a space for social critique.<sup>4</sup>

Critical theory assumes: first, that there is an abstract process of the "colonization of consciousness" by economic, industrialized forms which defines the power of the media; second, that there are direct relations between socio-economic and socio-psychological processes; and third, that these can be read off the surface of the text, not as a particular signifying form but as an exemplar of an abstract category of cultural practices. By assuming that the text is a mere exemplar of a superstructural commodity, Adorno collapses the distinction between production and consumption, making the consumer's alienation the same as the laborer's. Thus, while he recognizes that the consumer is an active coproducer of the cultural text, his view of the text as nothing more than a com-

modity-form leads him to see this work as the production of the (economic) success of the text. That is, the consumer's work is the production of pure exchange value. The superstructure has not only been industrialized; it has collapsed into the forces of production. For critical theory, the cultural object is pure exchange value, with no use value whatsoever, except perhaps as an ideological mystification in the service of the already existing structures of power:

To be sure exchange value exerts its power in a special way in the realm of cultural goods. For in the world of commodities this realm appears to be exempted from the power of exchange, to be in an immediate relationship with the goods, and it is this appearance, in turn, which alone gives cultural goods their exchange value. . . . The appearance of immediacy is as strong as the compulsion of exchange-value is inevitable. The social compact harmonises the contradiction. The appearance of immediacy takes possession of the mediated exchange-value itself. If the commodity in general combines exchange-value and use-value, then the pure use-value, whose illusion the cultural goods must preserve in completely capitalist society must be replaced by pure exchange-value, which, precisely in its capacity as exchange-value deceptively takes over the function of use-value. The specific fetish-character of music lies in this quid pro quo. The feelings which go to the exchange-value create the appearance of immediacy at the same time as the absence of a relation belies it. It has its basis in the abstract character of exchange-value. Every "psychological" aspect, every ersatz satisfaction, depends upon such social substitution. (Adorno, cited in Bradley, n.d., p. 28)

This results in a rather odd view of consumption and the consumer, as well as of signifying practices and processes of encoding. In the *Grundrisse* (1953/1973), Marx struggled with the problem

of consumption, though unsuccessfully. He finally concluded that consumption involves the "gratification of needs" which exist in a sphere of individual appropriation. Adorno psychologizes this need, and reduces the object of that appropriation to exchange value (in which both text and consumer are alienated and reified). This forces Adorno to confront the ultimately undecidable question of whether this need is real and unsatisfied, or illusory and produced by capitalism.

However, critical theory need not take that particular turn. John Berger (1972) has provided a reading of the "language" of publicity. Following Benjamin (1955/1968), Berger argues that, in the age of mechanical reproduction, the meaning of such visual language is no longer in the representations themselves. Thus, while publicity is "about" social relations, the message is embodied in its consumption—in how it is used, who uses it and for what purposes. Publicity is a language which, in its very consumption, produces its message: it is both the "life" of capitalism (as the necessary condition of consumption) and the "dream" of capitalism (as the celebration of future possibilities over present realities). Publicity is a "way of seeing" which proposes the possibility of transformation by consumption, a transformation which is measured by the "happiness of being envied" rather than by the actual possession of commodities. Berger makes the assumption, constitutive of critical theory, that there is a correspondence between social use and meaning. The text embodies a way of seeing only insofar as its appropriation is already defined by the moment of production or encoding. However, consumption is neither psychologized nor explained simply in terms of exchange value.

### Economism

The third classical approach to the interpretation of cultural texts is perhaps the most difficult to fit into the framework of the present discussion since its "interpretive practice" negates the practice of interpretation. It responds to neither the question of the politics of textuality nor to the problematic of cultural studies. Instead, it erases any textuality by treating the cultural text as (just another) commodity; it not only refuses to consider the relation of encoding and decoding, but denies the specificity of cultural practices. And hence, the question of the relationship between culture and society is replaced by questions of determination within the economic sphere.<sup>5</sup> There is, in a sense, no necessity for cultural interpretation to ever look at cultural texts.

Economism looks behind the messages to see the mode of economic forces and relations, the systems of production and distribution. Consumption is monolithically determined by production, and hence both cultural texts and decodings are epiphenomenal products of the "economic base." At its most extreme, economism proposes that a concern with specific textual and consumption practices is itself a mystification of the actual relations of power in which cultural commodities are implicated. However, such reductionism is not inherent in the practice of economism. On the contrary, it is obvious that economic and technological practices, not only determine cultural texts in part, but also insert them into already existing social relations of power. And there may be features of such texts, or moments in the history of particular cultural forms, which depend crucially on such factors.

Economism assumes a series of corre-

spondences or identities between the cultural text, its status within the circuit of production and consumption, the economic relations embodied within that circuit and the social relations of power. Most frequently, it analyzes the economic structures of media industries (e.g., modes of production, patterns of ownership, systems of distribution). But such "political economy" does not, by itself, constitute "economism" as an interpretive practice. Economism is based on implicit responses to the two questions discussed above, which allow it to read such analyses as making significant statements about the social functions of cultural texts, without any further interpretive mediations. For example, as Shore (1983) demonstrates, the six so-called "major" record companies control an enormous share of the records produced and sold in the world. But as he recognizes, the issue is what this tells us about the music being produced, the constraints that the system imposes upon the concrete production of particular records, how the record is consumed, and what the relations are between this "economic" power and forms of ideological and political domination. On the other hand, Smythe's (1977) article, "Communications: Blind-spot of Western Marxism," is certainly correct to argue that the product of the media, which they then sell for a profit, is the audience itself. Advertisers buy time only to obtain the real commodity—an audience. The interpretation, however, slides from the commodity status of the audience to claims about the media's concrete functions in structures of social power. To do so, it must equate the accumulation of capital (surplus value at the expense of labor) with the particular organization of political, ideological and moral power (Murdock, 1978). And it

must negate the ability of the text, as a cultural practice, to enter into the equation in specific (e.g., ideological) and even contradictory ways.

In summary, classical approaches can take a number of different forms. All of them refuse the problematic of cultural studies by making culture at best a reflection or mechanical reproduction of the social. They are thus able, not only to erase the specificity of cultural practices (even when talking about ideology), but also, to refuse to raise the question of production and consumption in terms of encoding and decoding. By identifying the determining moment of social life with economic forces and relations, they establish a correspondence between production and power. The text is nothing more than an impediment which must be shattered if its real functions are to be constituted within this equation. The differences amongst classical positions depends largely upon the assumed status of the epiphenomenal text: as a distorting but representational mirror; as alienated consumption; as another form of capital accumulation.

## THE HERMENEUTIC APPROACH

Within this approach, I want to describe a number of positions which give cultural or signifying practices a more active (ideological) role in the construction of power relations. Such positions assume that the relationship between cultural texts and social reality is always mediated by processes and structures of signification. Thus, texts reveal their social significance, not on the surface of images and representations, but rather, in the complex ways that they produce, transform and shape meaning-structures. Texts orchestrate social real-

ity, producing a symphonic experience which is not reducible to the cumulative contributions of each social determination. A text is not a simple reflection of a social reality, even a distorted one, nor is it a reflex response to the material conditions of its production. Thus, the interpretation of a text requires an appreciation of the specific rules of its formal existence as a signifying practice.

Furthermore, according to such positions, it is not primarily the factual, material social structure itself that is reworked and reshaped by the cultural text. Rather, society itself is already mediated through signifying practices. The question of the relationship between culture and society is answered by appealing to the third term—experience—which already locates the social within the cultural. Thus, social power is always to be viewed through the mediating structures of social experience, defined and determined, in the last instance, by class position. The “raw material” represented in cultural texts is social experience, and only indirectly then, social structures of power and domination. The critic, using the resources of literary theory, must look at the complex ways in which the text codes, reworks, and potentially transforms the very fabric of lived experience.

The result is a practice which seeks to find homologies or correspondences between the workings of the text and the social structures of experience; relationships embedded within the concrete mediations performed by the text. They exist only at a deeper level of textual meaning. At the level of this deep structure, points of correspondence can be identified and meanings which comment upon and enter into the experienced social reality of consumers and producers can be uncovered.



### Structural Mediation

Perhaps the most significant figure in the emergence of marxist cultural studies has been Raymond Williams. For Williams, the crucial mediation by which cultural text and social reality are linked is defined by the notion of the "structure of feeling" (Grossberg, 1977; Williams, 1961). This concept identifies a series of homologies between cultural texts as organizations of meaning, social reality as lived experience, and the "objective" structures of social organization and power. One can see the force of this concept in Williams' (1974) interpretation of television as a text, in which he seeks to uncover the common structure underlying television's existence within multiple social and cultural dimensions. As an economic-technological system, television was marketed as a privately owned commodity for the home, receiving messages from centralized transmitters outside the home, in the public world. There are, obviously, political and economic interests "behind" these historical production/marketing decisions. More importantly, this insertion of the technology according to a particular structuring of the world connects it to, and corresponds with, other dimensions of television's existence:

The technical possibilities that were commonly used corresponded to this structure of feeling: the enclosed internal atmosphere; the local interpersonal conflict; the close-up on private feeling. Indeed these emphases could be seen as internal properties of the medium itself, when in fact they were a selection of some of its properties according to the dominant structure of feeling. (Williams, 1974, p. 56)

This dominant structure of feeling, which apparently emerged in the nineteenth century to organize the experience

of modernization, is described as "mobile privatisation." For Williams, it organizes particular television texts, as well as other cultural texts, and provides the central images defining the "feel" of contemporary life: waiting inside the home for the outside world to be "transmitted" into one's private life. Moreover, Williams (1974) uncovers it as well as in the very social experience of television broadcasting, which he describes as *planned flow*: "This phenomenon, of planned flow, is then perhaps the defining characteristic of broadcasting, simultaneously as a technology and as a cultural form" (p. 86). And even this flow of programming, comprised of diverse cultural forms as well as advertising, previews, etc., can be itself read as embodying the same structure of feeling:

The apparently disjointed 'sequence' of items is in effect guided by a remarkably consistent set of cultural relationships: a flow of consumable reports and products, in which the elements of speed, variety and miscellaneity can be seen as organising: the real bearers of value. (p. 105)

Yet the flow of hurried items establishes a sense of the world: of surprising and miscellaneous events coming in, tumbling over each other, from all sides. (p. 116)

This, essentially, is how a directed but apparently casual and miscellaneous flow operates, culturally, following a given structure of feeling. (p. 111)

The structure of feeling is produced and responded to at the level of experience. Even when Williams finds, within a particular structure of feeling the intentional roots of its production (in structures of class power), such intentions are neither conscious nor individual. That is, the structure of feeling—mobile privatisation—organizes the television text, its form, its technology and even its socio-economic institutions, not

by some conscious design nor as a simple reflection of those class relations, but only through the mediating interventions of the production, within signification, of homologies between society and culture.

This explains, in part, the apparent slippage of production and consumption, encoding and decoding, in Williams' work. One cannot draw direct links between the structure of feeling and the conscious interests of the agents of production, nor can one assume that the structure of feeling defines the terms within which the texts of television are immediately consumed. Yet neither relationship can be denied. Certainly, the dominant structure of feeling has become dominant precisely insofar as it supports the interests (both political and economic) of the ruling classes. Similarly, the structure of feeling sets limits and exerts pressures on how the audience is able to interpret the television text. Yet it functions below the surface, mediating these moments. The dominant structure of feeling defines the experiential context within which both the production and the consumption of particular meanings are to be grounded.

Thus, Williams has collapsed the difference between encoding and decoding by simultaneously collapsing the social into the cultural. The relation between society and culture (a hermeneutics of suspicion) is accomplished through an analysis of the common textuality of both (a hermeneutics of faith). Society, now understood as the structure of social experience (which can be read off of the surface of class position) is part of the same dialectical processes as culture; both are symbolic productions of meaning. The two are interrelated and homologous processes. Their relation is defined at the point of their intersection—the structure of feeling. Their correspondence is guaranteed by the necessary

relation between class position and social experience through which class can be defined simultaneously as a structure of feeling and, in the last instance, as a set of economic and political interests.

Let us consider more carefully Williams' solution to the question of the politics of textuality; that is, the relation between encoding and decoding. As the discussion of Adorno demonstrates, merely accepting an "active" audience does not necessarily guarantee that the issue is acknowledged. One can take that active audience to be producing the text according to the interests of the dominant class, interests preprogrammed into the text itself. The issue is linked directly to the possibility of "political" struggles over and within cultural processes. In Williams' work, when we find the existence of different structures of feeling (embodying and producing different class experiences/positions), the clash between them is distant and global, having little to do with the concrete text. The reason for this is clear: the struggle is not in and over the text, as an attempt to impose a structure of meaning from one class position onto another (Volosinov, 1973). Rather, since there are two competing cultures, the question is deferred into the process of mediating between alternative structures of feeling.

While Williams maintains the possibility of struggle in his analysis of television, the question of the source of that struggle and its relation to the texts is submerged within his description of the dominant structure of feeling embedded within the texts. This is not simply a submission to the pessimism so often characterizing classical positions. It is, rather, the point at which the totalization implicit in the "dominant structure of feeling" and its necessary correspondence to social position breaks down. For, if this simple correspondence is

ruptured, as it clearly is in his actual practice (which recognizes the complexity of interests within the media), then Williams can only locate the source of resistance and struggle in some place outside of the already constituted class relations: hence, the importance of residual and emergent formations, each with its own structure of feeling. But such notions bring the question of decoding back to origins, forcing consumption to reproduce the model of production. Origins replaces effects, and the question of decoding is indefinitely deferred.

### **Mediation through Appropriation**

This dilemma sets the agenda for the next position to be discussed. This position attempts to understand the ways in which the struggles between different social groups are enacted within the domain of culture, as a contradiction between different meaningfully organized formations. The major representative of this position is the work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, under the leadership of Stuart Hall (Hall, 1980a; Grossberg, 1983).

As the Centre attempted to move beyond Williams' assumption of a single correspondence between class position, experience, and culture, much of their work focused on the phenomenon of subcultures and subcultural styles (Hall & Jefferson, 1976). Style, in fact, provided a new mediating term between the social and the cultural. Rather than beginning with two separable realms, each embodying a common structure, this position locates the homology within the subcultural formation itself. Style is a representation of, and an imaginary solution to, the experienced contradictions within the everyday lives of the members of the subculture. Such experience is "overdetermined," so that it can

no longer simply be read off the class position of the members. In fact, the experienced contradictions are often the result of the contradictions between various social registers of determination and identity. Furthermore, the "fit" between the pieces that are appropriated by the subculture and constructed into its style defines the homology. It includes, as a part of its very structure, the experienced contradictions as that to which the style responds by presenting itself as a "magical" solution. Thus, the relationship between culture and society is not a structural homology but rather, the homology of question and answer, of an "imaginary" solution to experienced contradictions. The correspondence cannot be read off the text itself, even as a deep structure. It can only be uncovered by placing the text within the social experience of its producers and consumers. Thus, the question of textuality is partially shifted (but only partially) from origins to effects, only partially because the text is still inserted into a pregiven structure of experience. (I will forego giving an example of such subcultural analysis until the discussion of Hebdige below.)

By changing the grounds on which the relation between culture and society was understood, the Centre found itself directly confronting the question of the relationship between encoding and decoding. For if subcultures could appropriate cultural practices into their own constructed style, then one has to begin by acknowledging that cultural texts can be read and used in different ways. Drawing upon semiotics, Hall (1980b) argued that texts are polyvocal and that there is no necessary correspondence between language (the surface of the text) and signification. The question then becomes that of identifying the relations between the origins of alternative

readings and the possibilities for struggling against the interests of the existing structures of domination. On the one hand, Hall argued, processes of cultural production encode particular meanings into the structure of the texts. Such "preferred meanings" attempt to represent experience in ways which support the interests of those already in power, both economically and politically. Such encoding is, however, often the product of, and could be read alternatively through, "negotiated codes" which constitute particular social and professional identities (such as the "routine practices" of news-making). Thus, one cannot assume that the intentions behind the production of news are simply those of the ruling class; the question is rather, how journalists, operating with professional codes seeking to produce objectively neutral reports, nevertheless consistently produce texts which encode the preferred meanings of the existing structures of power. Finally, the fact that texts encode certain preferred readings does not guarantee that they are read accordingly; that is, we cannot assume effects simply from origins. Rather, there are alternative and even oppositional codes, derived from their own subcultural formations, which allow audiences to decode texts in ways that are not only significantly different from, but even opposed to, the preferred readings.

However, because it remains within a hermeneutic approach which seeks correspondences between experience and textual meanings produced through particular decoding practices, this position ends up with an abyss which threatens to under the relation between culture and social structures of power. In one of the clearest applications of this theory, Brunsdon and Morley (1978) undertook a semiotic reading of the *Nationwide* television program. Their analysis fo-

cuses neither on a simple explication of meanings or images, nor on the uncovering of an underlying structure of the text. Instead, they are concerned with the codes which the text seems to offer for its own interpretation, revealed in such semiotic features as modes of address (which determine the status of actors and the formality or informality of the presentation), and the ways in which the text defines its own "ideological problematic." For example, they conclude that:

the 'persona' of the programme, then is a professionally formulated reconstruction based in and on 'popular speech' and its sedimented wisdom. The use of this linguistic register is one of the ways in which *Nationwide* constructs 'ordinary people' as the subject of its particular kind of speech. This 'populist ventriloquism' is a crucial strand in the way the programme attempts to forge an 'identification' with its audience. (pp. 8-9)

Here we can clearly see the shift in interpretive interest, no longer focused on the text as an isolated and autonomous cultural object, but as part of a specific cultural-social formation in which strategies encoded into the text attempt to define the ways audiences bring these texts to bear on their own social experiences—according to the encoded, preferred reading.

In a second part of the study, Morley (1980) attempted to describe how different groups within the audience of the program actually decoded the text. He argues that it is through the mechanism of identification that the audience is brought into the circuit of meaning of the preferred reading, but if these identifications are ineffective or challenged, alternative decodings become possible. Thus, "we must assume that there will be no necessary 'fit' or transparency between the encoding and decoding ends of the

communication chain" (p. 11). "We need to see how the different sub-cultural structures and formations within the audience, and the sharing of different cultural codes and competencies amongst different groups and classes, 'determine' the decoding of the message for different sections of the audience" (p. 15). Using Bourdieu's (1980) idea of "cultural capital," Morley argues that how a text is decoded depends upon the codes available to the interpreter. Codes function within the domain of culture much as capital functions within the domain of economic production; they allow for the generation of surplus meaning. But while capital is defined only by its circulation through the circuit, Morley fixes cultural capital within the individual, defined as the intersection of social identities or experiences. That is, a particular experiential position within the social formation predetermines the availability of particular resources for decoding. Once again, the interpreter is seen as appropriating the text into the already constituted space of his or her cultural formation, understood as a structure of experience. And, once again, the question of effects is postponed into that of the origins of such resources.

Morley found, not surprisingly, very little relationship between the "preferred meaning" encoded into the text, and the diversity of alternative decodings made by the audience. He also found it impossible to specify the cultural resources of a particular group as a function of their social experience. In the end, the two studies together foregrounded the very real gap between encoding and decoding, origin and effects, production and consumption. He could find relations between the social and cultural within both the production and the consumption of the text, but he could not bring the two sets of relations into relation. While he

begins by arguing that the "key question" is "exactly what is the nature of the 'fit' between, say, class, socio-economic or educational position and cultural/interpretive code" (p. 20), he concludes that "social position in no way directly correlates with decodings" (p. 137). His conclusion questions the very assumption of a distinction between the social and cultural, and he argues that experience itself must be located within the field of discourse: "This is to insist on the social production of meaning and the social location of subjectivity/ies—indeed it is to locate the production of subjectivity within specific discursive formations" (p. 157). But such a move would make the assumption of an homology between social experience and cultural meanings fortuitous. This apparent contradiction between the two issues originally described grounds the shift into "discursive approaches" to cultural interpretation (Morley, 1981; Coward 1977).

### **Mediation through Signifying Practices**

If hermeneutic positions seek correspondence, homologies or fits between structures of signification and experience, the Centre's work attempted to reproduce this structure on top of the split between encoding and decoding. But they sought to describe both signification and experience at the level of meaning, or signifieds. There is another tradition in marxist thought, rooted in the work of Brecht, Benjamin and perhaps Bakhtin, which locates meaning within its specific cultural mode of production. Consequently, the relation between culture and society, and that between encoding and decoding, are reconceptualized as competing forms of signifying practices.

One example of this strategy is Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979), which combines the hermeneutic subcultural theory of the Centre with certain ideas taken from a discursive approach. For Hebdige, style is not merely an alternative construction of meaning, but an alternative mode of production. It does not merely offer different "cultural capital" but challenges the very way in which the signifier and the signified, language and meaning/experience, are connected. Subcultural styles deny and disrupt "the deceptive innocence of appearances" (p. 19) on which dominant structures of meaning are built and maintained. This "naturalness" of the meaning of reality, of the world of experience, of the circuit connecting object and sign, is not only problematized but ultimately rejected by the practice of style. The social processes of production, reproduction and consumption, depending as they do on the processes by which objects are given meaning and transformed into signs, are contradicted by the very production of style as a signifying practice.

Hebdige fails to see the implication that style is the de-construction of the possibility of any representation of reality as natural, (i.e., of both ideology and experience). This would move style outside of an hermeneutic approach for one would no longer be comparing structures of meaning. The relation between culture and society, and the struggle between encoding and decoding would be located within the contradictions between competing modes of (symbolic) production. Hebdige, however, continues to see style as a representation of, and an imaginary solution to, experienced contradictions. Thus, following the Centre's model, the first half of the book is an ethnographic description of the experience of particular social groups.

But in the second half—a description and elucidation of subcultural styles—it becomes clear that we can not seek structural homologues or cultural resources. One is, if you like, still comparing these two planes, but the relationship between them is only describable in terms of the reproduction of the same constitutive signifying practice within each.

Hebdige continues the Centre's hermeneutic position: "The succession of white subcultural forms can be read as a series of deep-structural adaptations which symbolically accommodate or expunge the black presence from the host community. . . . We can watch, played out on the loaded surface of British working class youth cultures, a phantom history of race relations since the War" (pp. 44–45). Hebdige argues that subcultural styles construct "forbidden identities" which reflect the experience of the group. This representational identity provides the appearance of a magical resolution, within experience, of the contradictions. But because this identity is the product of signifying practices, it is always open to reappropriation and is, at best, temporary.

When the analysis turns to modes of symbolic practice, it opens up wider and even more disparate readings. For example, on the one hand, punk involved an "open identification with Black British and West Indian Culture" which antagonized, not only the dominant culture, but other youth subcultures as well. On the other hand, "despite the strong affinity, the integrity of the two forms—punk and reggae—was scrupulously maintained, and . . . punk music, like every other aspect of punk style, tended to develop in direct antithesis to its apparent source" (pp. 67–68). Here we have an origin which is negated by the signifying practice of punk; it is this transformation of origins into effects which char-

acterizes, above all, the punk style:

punk style had made a decisive break not only with the parent culture but with its own *location in experience*. This break was both inscribed and re-enacted in the signifying practices embodied in punk style. The punk ensembles, for instance, did not so much magically resolve experienced contradictions as represent the experience of contradiction itself in the form of visual puns. (Hebdige, 1979, p. 121)

Punk style does not so much "fit" within and answer to experience as reproduce within itself the practice of contradiction, a practice which constitutes the signification of that experience. Punk style is the deconstruction of all meaning in a world in which meaning is already deconstructed.

Punk has become an emblem for Hebdige's argument that all style is "a semiotic guerilla warfare." But when he seeks the representation of experience in style, the emblem forces him beyond his own descriptions: "The safety pins and bin liners signified a relative material poverty which was either directly experienced or sympathetically assumed, and which in turn was made to stand for the spiritual paucity of everyday life" (p. 115). Accounting for a particular style, Hebdige moves from a particular contradiction to a general one, from a phantom history of race relations to a general history of the deconstruction of experience, of the collapse of the future, and with these, the end of all spiritual meaning. The 'homology' between culture and social experience is reconstituted by making the signifying practice of style "represent different signifying practices" (p. 120).

The issue has slid from what style signifies to the homology between the way in which it signifies and the very structure of experience within the class

formation: as reality has lost its meaning (i.e., as social signifying practices have been altered, whether or not this is experienced as such), so the subculture constructs a style which is defined by its practice of intentionally collapsing all meaning. The collapse itself—the production of the very reality it represents—is not the issue. Rather, the focus is on the relation between the practice of style and the practice by which experience is dismantled within a subculture's reality. The correspondence, so to speak, is located in a common signifying practice, represented in both style and experience.

### Mediation through Narrative

Before leaving the hermeneutic approach, I want to briefly discuss positions which use narrative structures as the basis for cultural interpretation. Such positions read the narrative structure of a cultural text as an attempt to represent or work out the contradictions of social life. There are many sources for contemporary narrative theory (Rimmon-Kenan, 1984), including Propp (1928/1968), Levi-Strauss (1958/1963), Barthes (1970/1974), Bakhtin (1981), Greimas (1966), Frye (1957), and Burke (1945), as well as theories of historical narrative. Furthermore, the different positions describe the narrative structure and its relation to the social world differently (e.g., mythic narratives; narrative structures which reconcile contradictions, psychoanalytic processes of identification through which the reader is carried through the narrative, and semiotic circuits of transformation).

Perhaps the most significant contemporary use of narrative theory within Marxist cultural interpretation can be found in the work of Fredric Jameson (1981). Although this is only part of his

larger theory of interpretation, its centrality is evident in his description of his project as the attempt to "restructure the problematics of ideology, of the unconscious and of desire, of representation, of history, and of cultural production, around the all-informing process of narrative" (p. 13). In fact, the subtitle of his most recent book, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, is somewhat misleading, for narrative is *the* social-symbolic act, the very structure and production of history, the mediation of reality and fantasy, and the nature of the "political unconscious." Jameson wants to rescue the possibility of a hermeneutic reading of history as narrative which would also rescue the utopian projects of culture and marxism.

Jameson has a unique, indeed post-modern, view of the relationship between culture and society. While he argues that the social has collapsed into the cultural, this is the product and sign of the "consumer society" and its associated modes of production:

I will say that culture, far from being an occasional matter of the reading of a monthly good book or a trip to the drive-in, seems to me the very element of consumer society itself; no society has ever been saturated with signs and messages like this one . . . until the omnipresence of culture in this society is even dimly sensed, realistic conceptions of the nature and function of political praxis today can scarcely be framed. (1979a, p. 139)

By both accepting (as an historical fact) and refusing (as a theoretical position) this collapse, Jameson reconstitutes the hermeneutic correspondence between particular narrative structures, narrative (and culture) as a mode of production, and social modes of production (with their associated class contradictions).

The assumption of this series of ho-

mologies grounds Jameson's attempt to understand the utopian possibilities of history and the ideological functions of culture. According to Jameson (1981), while history is a real materiality never reducible to the symbolic, it is available to us only as texts. The real is always mediated to us through interpretive paradigms ("ideologemes"). Culture, then, involves an ongoing transformation of these received texts and defines the intertextual existence of history by constructing and transforming the narrative paradigms within which we have received history. History is constantly displaced into and created within the semiotics of narrativization; that is, the practice of organizing particular narratives.

This narrativizing process, however, does not dissolve the distinction between society and culture, base and superstructure. Rather, it allows Jameson, following Levi-Strauss, to reconstitute the relationship. Culture transforms and provides resolutions in the realm of the symbolic or ideological to more basic political and economic contradictions:

This is why a book like *The Nether World*, . . . is best read, not for its documentary information on the conditions of Victorian slum life, but as testimony about the narrative paradigms that organize middleclass fantasies about those slums and about "solutions" that might resolve, manage, or repress the evident class anxieties aroused by the existence of an industrial working class and an urban lumpenproletariat. (p. 186)

The function of the political unconscious is to seek "by logical permutations and combinations to find a way out of its intolerable closure and to produce a 'solution,' through the semiotic transformation of the narrative" (1981, p. 167). This "intolerable closure" is the particular and often contradictory desires,



determined by social position and class struggles, that are unavailable to us except through such symbolic mediations. The function of the narrative apparatus, then, is to rechart these libidinal investments at the site of competing and multiple modes of production, in order to open up the multiplicity of generic narratives—both ideological and utopian—within the text.

The ideological function represses the contradictions, as well as the real possibility of their resolution, by the projection of an imaginary solution, for example, by the symbolic construction of a semiotic position within the logical possibilities of the "combinatoire" of characters (see Jameson's (1979c) reading of the fascism of Wyndham Lewis' narratives). On the other hand, the utopian function of such narratives is to offer the symbolic possibility of a real (i.e., utopian) transformation of history through compensatory structures.

Consequently, we must "grasp mass culture not as empty distraction or 'mere' false consciousness, but rather as a transformational work on social and political anxieties and fantasies which must then have some effective presence in the mass cultural text in order subsequently to be 'managed' or repressed" (1979a, p. 141). Unlike Adorno, Jameson argues that "the works of mass culture cannot be ideological without at one and the same time being implicitly or explicitly utopian" (1979a, p. 144). We can see this method at work, briefly, in Jameson's readings of contemporary popular films. For example, concerning *Jaws*, he writes:

We are thus authorized to read the death of Quint in the film as the two fold symbolic destruction of an older America—the America of small business and individual private enterprise of a now outmoded kind, but also

the America of the New Deal and the crusade against Nazism, the older America of the depression and the war and the heyday of classical liberalism.

Now the content of the partnership between Hooper and Brody projected by the film may be specified socially and politically, as the allegory of an alliance between the forces of law-and-order and the new technocracy of the multinational corporations: an alliance which must be cemented, not merely by its fantasized triumph over the ill-defined menace of the shark itself, but above all by the indispensable precondition of the effacement of that more traditional image of an older America which must be eliminated from the historical consciousness and social memory before the new power system takes place. This operation may continue to be read in terms of mythic archetypes, if one likes, but then in that case it is a Utopian and ritual vision. (1981, pp. 143–144)

Similarly, concerning *The Godfather*, Jameson argues that its ideological function is to displace the problem of the "deterioration of daily life" from the economic to the ethical realm. On the other hand, its utopian impulse lies in its projection of the family as the fantasy of a resolution, a fantasy because it is located in the terms of an alien (non-American) other. That such solutions are the product of narrative acts is made even clearer in Jameson's reading of *Dog Day Afternoon*, in which it is the construction of a crucial narrative place—that of the FBI agent—which provides the resolution, within which "the whole allegorical structure of *Dog Day Afternoon* suddenly emerges in the light of the day" (1979b, p. 88).

We have now returned to the dilemma which Williams' hermeneutic reduction of the social to the cultural made obvious: the reading of a particular text assumes that the positions of producers and consumers vis à vis the text are identical within the common intertextual space of

culture. This dilemma suggests that marxist interpretive theory must rethink the question of the relationship between culture, society and experience.

## THE DISCURSIVE APPROACH

Within this category of interpretive practices, I want to describe a number of positions which refuse the hermeneutic binarism of text and experience while even more radically sliding the social into the cultural. Within such positions, textuality is a productive practice whose (imaginary) product is experience itself. Experience can no longer serve as a mediation between the cultural and the social since it is not merely within the cultural but is the product of cultural practices. As Hall (1980c) suggests, this move can be traced to Althusser's (1970/1971) interpretation of ideology as the unconscious system of representation of the imaginary relationship between people and their real conditions of existence. That is, the way in which we experience our relationship to the world is precisely that which ideological signifying practices manufacture. Ideology works as a practice, not merely by producing a system of meanings which purport to represent the world but rather, by producing its own system of meanings as the real, natural (i.e., experienced) one. Thus, the issue of ideology is not merely the conflict between competing systems of meaning but rather, the power of a particular system to represent its own representations as a direct reflection of the real, to produce its own meanings as experience. It is a question of signifying practice and representation rather than signification alone.

Experience can no longer be seen as something pregiven, outside of particular cultural or textual practices. It is already

inherently implicated with structures of power. Power is no longer outside of culture (in the social) but within the very structures of signifying practices themselves. This radical negation of the binarism of culture and society implies as well a reconceptualization of the gap between encoding and decoding. For the subject, whether producer or consumer, cannot be defined by resources or experience existing outside of the network of cultural practices. Neither the production nor the consumption of particular texts can be approached as if the already socially constituted subject comes to the text, from somewhere outside of the intertextual cultural environment. The issue is reconceptualized in terms of competing forms of signifying practices, or the different ways in which the text locates the subject within its construction of experience. Thus, it is the cultural practices themselves which define identities for their producers and consumers by inserting them into the fabric of their discursive spaces. It is this power of the text to locate the subject by producing its intertextual domain of experience that becomes the object of critical interpretation. It cannot be read off the surface of the text as a system of meaning, nor is it to be found by a hermeneutic excavation of some deeper structure of signifieds. It is rather to be found in the ways in which the text produces meaning through its practices of structuring signifiers around the subject. The issue is not so much the particular knowledge of reality (true or false, mystified or utopian) which is made available, but the way in which the individual is given access to that knowledge and consequently, empowered or de-powered. Rather than seeking a series of mediations or correspondences, discursive positions seek the processes of encoding and decoding as a series of discontinuities and ruptures which are

woven together, by signifying practices, around the sites of social identity and subjective power.

### Positioning the Subject

Althusser, drawing upon the structural psychoanalysis of Lacan (1966/1977), argued that ideology works by producing or positioning the subject within its circuit. Lacan argued, more generally, that language (signification) is made possible only by a "splitting" of the subject. One accedes to language and enters into the cultural only by representing oneself in language (I) but this entails the repression of the speaking subject as the absent source (the unconscious). The subject within language is, then, already a position within a system of cultural power. Althusser identifies the specificity of ideological practices precisely by the specific point at which the subject is inserted into signification, a point from which the apparent givenness of experience cannot be problematized. Ideological practices locate the individual language user within language as its absent source who is therefore responsible for the meanings produced, the transcendental agent of experience. The individual as a subject becomes complicitous with his or her own insertion into the ideological production of an imaginary but lived reality. Ideology accomplishes its task, on such a view, by having already defined the phenomenological relationship of subject and object, and thus, the possibilities of power and knowledge.

This position is most clearly and influentially exhibited in the work of *Screen*, a British film journal, in the seventies (Heath, 1981). Their analyses of films focused on the ways in which the camera functions to produce a particular series of identifications for the viewer.

For example, they argued that in the classic Hollywood cinema, one is positioned by the cameras as if one were seeing the scene of the film from an omniscient position outside of the scene of action itself. That identification with the camera slides into the particular characters within the film, through the way in which the camera relates to the positions of the characters themselves (as agents of knowledge). Consequently, the viewer is "stitched" or "sutured" into the text. Furthermore, the camera of the Hollywood film identifies with the male protagonists and renders the female the object of the voyeuristic sight/site of the camera, the male characters, and the spectator. Alternatively, the avant-garde cinema often places the camera within the *mise-en-scene*, imposing a reflexively limited point of view on the spectator, and dispersing the viewing subject into a multiplicity of positions, no longer claiming a privileged point of entry into or existence within the text, and thus, declaring no single access to its truth.

The implications of this position, thus far, are apparently not that different from those of the classical positions (Allor, 1984). If the subject is totally the product of the encounter with the filmic texts, which create a monolithic identification with the camera, then the audience is once again merely the object of a (now textual) manipulative practice. The simplest solution is, of course, to allow for a multiplicity of contradictory subject positions and their different accessibilities to different audiences. A text may in fact embody different textual practices and thus, produce fractured subjectivities. But more importantly, the consumer of the text is already a subject; he or she has a history of textual or ideological existence. Thus, rather than speaking of experiences, codes or resources that the individual brings to

the text, we can talk about the intertextuality of the practice of consumption itself, a discursive history in which both the text and the subject have already been determined and through which they are reinserted into that process of determination. As some feminist film critics (Kuhn, 1982) have argued, many Hollywood films can not totally render the female into the passive object of the camera's male gaze. Rather, there are points in the text itself in which the female cannot be coded within the dominant signifying practices and consequently ruptures, or threatens to rupture, the text. There are then alternative and resistant readings already coded into the text, insofar as the text always exists only within the larger intertextual context of encoding and decoding.

While this position seems to ignore the question of encoding, it is actually raised as the constitution of the terms of decoding. That is, such readings must identify the particular relations of power that are coded by the production of particular subject positions. The dominant practices of the Hollywood "cinematic apparatus" produce subject positions which are identified with the preexisting categories of domination: capitalist, male, white, etc. This assumed correspondence allows those practices which differ to be comfortably identified with the opposition or dominated other (e.g., socialist, female, etc.).

Of course, such identifications are not as serendipitous as they may appear. Obviously, one might appeal to the marxist maxim that, at the very least, the dominant culture will attempt to reproduce the dominant relations of power. There are, however, other dimensions to the practice of such positions, which ground its ideological readings, and which are already implicit in its semiotic and psychoanalytic foundations. The

former depends upon the film's production of signifiers in particular ways which leave "structured absences" within its narrative or surface textuality. By locating particular characters and events within a connotational chain, the film must attempt to hide the particular moments which it is unable to code according to its own ideology.

A more powerful critical tool of such practices is based upon a psychoanalytic narrative theory which focuses on the ability of cultural practices to "stitch" the consumer into the structure of signifiers itself. For example, by using our identification with the position of the camera and its own narrative structure, the film can displace that identification, making it slide through a series of identifications within the narrative practices of the representation. We not only identify with the camera, but with the narrator and even further, as a result, we enter into the narrative itself by virtue of the narrator's own identifications within the text. Thus, we are not only positioned within the circuit of signifier and signified (whether as a unified or fragmented subject), but in the narrative movement of the signifiers themselves. This use of narrative theory constructs the film's power, not only in terms of its subject positions, but also in terms of how it uses such identificatory processes to code and render acceptable the contradictions and movements of resistance that threaten to disrupt the ideology of the particular textual system of power.

### Articulating the Subject

The question of the positions which ideology creates for the individual as a subject does not, however, exhaust the concerns of marxist criticism, nor is it the only use which has been made of Althusser's critique of experience. Re-

cent work has returned to the relationship between signifying practices and social reality, without appealing to the humanistic assumption of a pre-given social experience. It focuses on the construction of social positions or identities, and the "articulation" of particular practices and meanings as belonging to these identities.

This position has been defended in the more recent work of Stuart Hall (1983; forthcoming), as well as by a number of Marxist feminists such as Angela McRobbie (1982). Arguing that experience is the product of complex processes of overdetermination, Hall transposes the question of cultural criticism from the search for necessary correspondences (whether direct or mediated) between culture and society, to the analysis of the specific ways in which different practices, meanings and identities are "articulated" together. The critic can no longer assume that there is a necessary relationship between a text and a particular meaning, or between a practice and its representation in signification, or between a particular social position and a structure of experience. But there are always relations or correspondences *produced* between practices, texts and identities. The problematic of cultural studies is transformed, concerned with how a particular practice—signifying or social—is located in a network of other practices, at a particular point, in particular relations.

This reconceptualization of the relation between culture and society is accomplished by rejecting the gap between encoding and decoding. The question of power is transposed from origins to concrete effects. If the ideological significance of a cultural text cannot be read off of the text itself, the task of the analyst is to examine how the particular text or practice has been "inflected"

or inserted into its context in such a way as to have identifiable ideological consequences.

While acknowledging the existence of the real (e.g., as the nonsignifying social practice), Hall argues that the effects of such practices are always articulated within the cultural regime of signification. The critic cannot escape ideology, and so must always talk about the politics of the representations of the social. Cultural criticism becomes the study of the connotational codes within which a particular term (such as nation or democracy) or a particular point of social identity (such as black, female, or adolescent) are located. We examine the specific ideological inflections or effects that, while not inherent in the texts, are produced for the text by its insertion within a set of connotational codes, its articulation to other signs.

Althusser argues, in essence, that the question of ideology is how particular significations appear as the natural representations of reality, so that individuals accede and consent to their explicit organizations of reality and their implicit structures of power and domination. Rejecting a psychoanalytic theory of subject-positioning, Hall (1980d) turns to Gramsci's (1971) theory of hegemony. Hegemony is the ongoing process by which a particular social block (made up of various class fractions) maintains its position of power by mobilizing public support for its social projects in a broad spectrum of social life. Hegemony is a question of leadership rather than explicit domination and control, containment rather than incorporation. It involves the colonization of popular consciousness or common sense through the articulation of specific social practices and positions within ideological codes or chains of connotational significance.

The fact that hegemony must operate

on a broad terrain of social and cultural life means, for Hall, that the politics of its articulations cannot be assigned to preconstituted structures or categories of power. One cannot explain particular ideological moments by reducing them to a single contradiction within the real. Rather, such effects are determined by a multiplicity of power relations which can only be identified within the particular context of the articulation. Thus, Hall argues that the contradictions of race and gender are at least as fundamental as, and certainly irreducible to, the economic contradictions (whether in terms of class—capital versus labor, or of modes of production—forces versus relations of production) that have preoccupied marxists. These three planes on which power is organized may have different relations to each other at different points within the struggle for hegemony.

Angela McRobbie's (1982) study of the ideology of adolescent femininity within a mass circulation magazine, *Jackie*, is one of the best examples of this approach:

It will be argued here that the way *Jackie* addresses 'girls' as a monolithic grouping, as do all other women's magazines, serves to obscure differences, of class for example, between women. Instead it asserts a sameness, a kind of *false* sisterhood, which assumes a common definition of womanhood or girlhood. Moreover by isolating out a particular 'phrase' or age as the focus of interest, one which coincides roughly with that of its readers, the magazine is in fact creating this 'age-ness' as an ideological construction. 'Adolescence' and here, female adolescence, is itself an ideological 'moment' whose connotations are immediately identifiable with those 'topics' included in *Jackie*. And so, by at once defining its readership vis à vis age, and by describing what is of relevance to this age group, *Jackie* and women's magazines in general create a 'false totality.' (p. 265)

The appearance of this totality allows the significations of *Jackie* to function ideologically, to appear as representations of the real. It allows no space for alternative constructions of identity around adolescence and femininity. The ideological significance of any text within the magazine can only be understood in terms of its inflection by its existence within the larger cultural and social context of the magazine and adolescent feminine culture, that is, in terms of the project of constructing a "false totality" around the particular identity.

A second example is provided by Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke & Roberts (1978) *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*, which examines the ideological articulation of the crime of mugging within a larger crisis of the social formation, defined by issues of both race relations and "law and order." By looking at the complex intertextuality within which mugging was given an ideological significance, the authors attempt to describe the ways in which this particular construction participated in the production of a hegemonic formation.

Perhaps most radically, and unlike the other positions I have discussed, this position locates, within its own analysis of the relationship between culture and social power, the possibility of, and the sites for resistance. For, corresponding to the struggle for hegemony, the struggle against it must involve the struggle to disarticulate the ideological inflections which are produced on a broad number of issues and social identities.

Thus, rather than being concerned with the production of subjectivities within texts, a discursive theory of articulation examines the ways in which particular sites of social identity are articulated (and hence, the experiences to be associated with them produced) in an

intertextual context of ideology. In the end, the question of encoding and decoding becomes, if not irrelevant, a misleading way of framing relations of cultural power. Rather, the question is the existence of particular inflections of social identities and practices within the articulating cultural environment, and the gaps within this network which allow for struggle and resistance. While previously discussed positions must, at best, find it difficult to find an optimistic place for the broad range of actively struggling social groups, within this position it is precisely the actions of such groups that articulate particular messages with particular meanings or inflections, into particular connotative networks. But this decoding process, if we are to continue referring to it in this way (since it includes resistance to, and the reproduction of, existing structures of domination) is not the product of already available cultural capital, preconstituted social identities or domains of experience which necessarily correspond to positions of power or powerlessness. Both encoding and decoding are only artificial moments within the struggle for and resistance to hegemony, defined by the particular context of the text itself. Nevertheless, because it locates social reality or power within culture, this position continues to see power in terms that escape signification and the differences it constitutes (e.g., in various social and economic positions of domination).

### **Power and the Materiality of Culture**

This final position is best represented in the work of Michel Foucault, and reverses the premise of a discursive approach, by collapsing culture into the social (Grossberg, 1982). Nevertheless, given the primarily methodological in-

terest of this inquiry, Foucault's position bears important similarities to the two discursive positions previously described. Like these, Foucault refuses to begin with either experience as an innocent measure of social reality, or with an appeal to a transcendental, autonomous subject (i.e., the determiner of its own determinations, unified and transparent to its own self-reflection). But unlike other discourse positions, Foucault refuses to assume any absolute distinction between culture (the signifying) and society (the nonsignifying locus of a power which is represented in and maintained through signification). Finally, Foucault refuses to define questions of culture and power around the central issue of subjectivity or identity—as the primary sites or vehicles for the production of power-effects.<sup>6</sup>

This position attempts to describe the contextual articulations of discursive and nondiscursive events together. Like the previous one, it is concerned with the particular network of effects and rejects the assumption that any event has inherent within it its own meanings or effects or even, political implications. But Foucault is not willing to limit the category of effects to the production of connotational webs or codes of meaning (i.e., ideology). Rather, the very fact of a text's existence at a particular social site—its materiality—is the occasion for multiple planes of effects beyond the ideological. Hence, power can neither be located entirely within this plane, nor entirely outside of it (as if merely the reproduction of external relations of power upon the organization of meaning).

Rejecting the separation of culture and society, Foucault (1979) locates any event in a multiplicity of interacting planes or regimes of power within the social formation. We can see this demand for specificity in Foucault's own use of

**"event":**

It is not a question of putting everything on a certain plane, that of the event, but of seeing clearly that there exists a whole series of levels of different types of events, which do not have the same range, nor the same chronological breadth, nor the same capacity to produce effects. The problem is to both distinguish the events, differentiate the networks and levels to which they belong, and to reconstitute the threads which connect them and make them give rise to one another. (p. 33)

The materiality of events points to the ways in which we live and act, ways over which we have no control and about which we are unaware. This is not simply the ideologically constructed plane of experience, for experience itself (phenomenologically understood) is merely another set of events or facts, to be included within the analysis of the network of effects.

The identity of an event is only given in its contextual specification; it is fractured and dispersed into the multiplicity of its effects. These effects define the "conditions of possibility," operating in either direction, of the particular practice. In a sense, Foucault (1978a) carries the theory of overdetermination to its logical conclusion, and this has important methodological consequences for cultural criticism. If any event is articulated at a particular point in a network of effects, whether its existence is primarily determined by its production of meaning-effects is an empirical question. That is, a text may be more than, or other than its meaningfulness, depending on whether its most powerful effects are mediated by processes of signification:

I do not question the discourses for their silent meanings but on the fact and the conditions of their manifest appearance: not on the contents which they may conceal, but on the transformations which they may have

effectuated; not on the meaning which is maintained in them like a perpetual origin, but on the field where they co-exist, remain and disappear. It is a question of the analysis of the discourses in their exterior dimensions. From whence arise three consequences:

1. Treat past discourses not as a theme for a commentary which would revive it, but as a monument to be described in its character-disposition.
2. Seek in the discourse not its laws of construction . . . but its conditions of existence.
3. Refer the discourse . . . not to the subject which might have given rise to it, but to the practical field in which it is deployed. (p. 15)

Of course, once we have allowed that our concern is with the multiplicity of effects which may both exceed and absent the meaningful, then the issue of encoding and decoding is itself called into question. For Foucault, this dilemma embodies marxism's inability to confront the reality of power as the very micro-structure of effects or relations. The dilemma, by recreating the duality of culture and society, always locates power as something outside of an event, something brought into it (intentions or interests) or something taken away from it (hegemonic consent). Power is, instead, the intricacies of the particular network in which events make possible other events; it is a "capillary action," organizing and extending the possibilities of its own existence. Thus, power is always located in "apparatuses" which are built upon "technologies," programmings of behavior (Foucault, 1981). An apparatus not only emerges at a particular site, it is also located within or excluded from "regimes of jurisdiction and veridication" (p. 8). The former prescribes what can be done: procedures and strategies; the latter justifies these ways by producing particular discourses as "true."



If Foucault refuses to locate power outside of the apparatus itself, he also refuses to center or hierarchize it. He rejects notions of ideology, hegemony, the State, or capitalism, as if these could explain the materiality of power. For example, in his consideration of the Gulag (1979, p. 51), he refuses any category which reduces its specific structuring of power: For example, treating it as a structure of meaning to be read off texts; or as a single effect, perhaps with multiple causes; or as a specific instance of a repeated historical phenomenon; or as the negation in practice of its explicit ideology. Foucault, in fact, refuses any reductionism; human life itself is not merely labor, nor the production of meaning: "The life and time of man are not by nature labour, but pleasure, restlessness, merry-making, rest, needs, accidents, desires, violent acts, robberies, etc." (1979, p. 62). Life is both chance and determinations, both power and pleasure. It is the complex interweaving of power, knowledge and desire that defines the politics of an event.

The analytic task (Foucault, 1972/1980) is to provide a "genealogy" of specific practices and apparatuses, mapping out the conditions of possibility into which they emerged, and out of which they elaborated new (and even unintended) effects. And the political task is similarly transformed; no longer seeking to identify the conspiracy or structure of power behind the surfaces of everyday life, Foucault seeks instead to locate those voices and practices which have been excluded by the contemporary technologies of power, and to struggle to open a space within which their resistance can be heard. It is then the already existing history and context of struggle which needs to be organized, not as the attempt to develop alternative or counter-hegemonic strategies but as the ongoing

struggle against all moments of power and domination.

My own work on rock and roll (Grossberg, 1983/84; 1984) attempts to use this position to analyze rock and roll as a set of apparatuses within which a variety of events are empowered as sites of pleasure for youth cultures. These are, simultaneously, both the condition of possibility of rock and roll and yet, deconstructed by the very technologies it organizes. We can see another example of this position in the recent work of Hebdige who has, in a series of articles (1981a, 1981b; 1983a, 1983b), sought to describe the complex "effectivities" of particular cultural texts: the motorscooter, pop art, and the products and discourses through which "America" was constructed as in "imaginary" category within the British social formation. To consider one example in more detail. Hebdige has begun a "genealogy" of youth in England, pointing to the complex and productive relations between a range of discourses, social institutions and technologies of surveillance: "The vectors of power I want to trace cut across a number of heterogeneous sites—discursive categories, institutions and the spaces between institutions. Those sites are youth, sexuality, fashion, subculture, display, and its corollary, surveillance" (1983a, p. 71). He draws three conclusions. First, youth only exists when it is posed as a problem and consequently, the power of youth is precisely, through a variety of practices, to pose a threat. Second, the resistance or "insubordination" of youth can only be understood as a "micropolitics of pleasure" which exceeds the current boundaries of "legitimate" political practice. And third, the politics of youth is enacted on the material surface, at the interface between surveillance and the evasion or transformation of surveillance into pleasure (i.e.,

as style). Although Hebdige attempts to return this politics of style to the space of the sign, it is clear that it exceeds the question of signification and representation. It is the production of youth as difference, in the gaps between the signs, in the leaks within hegemony, in the contradictions within institutions, and in the heart of the capillary existence of power. Further, if we accept Foucault's (1976/1978b) argument that the contemporary technologies of power articulate a "biopolitics" in which the body of the population—the very materiality of human existence—becomes the object for new strategies of control, then Hebdige seems to be suggesting that the construction, emergence and elaboration of "youth" is both a product of and a resistance to this apparatus.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I will attempt to provide a useful schematic summary of the ten positions described above, emphasizing their methodologies of cultural interpretation. I have tried to point to the necessity for a more reflective consideration of the theoretical, methodological and political assumptions which organize the ways in which we interpret cultural texts:

*Classical approaches:* culture reflects society; decoding is unproblematic.

1. False consciousness: the text is a distorting mirror which acts directly upon its audience.

2. Critical theory: the text imposes forms of consumption which reflect their industrialized modes of production.

3. Economism: the text is erased in favor of the forces and relations of its production.

*Hermeneutic approaches:* culture represents society; decoding is problematic.

4. Mediation through structure: the

relation between the text and social experience is defined by a common "structure" or organization of meaning which links the encoded interests and the decoded interpretations.

5. Mediation through appropriation: the relation between the text and social experience is defined by the former's ability to be "fit" into the codes which structure interests (encoding) and experience (decoding); the absence of any necessary relation between the two sets of codes results in a gap between encoding and decoding such that the homology between text and social experience must be examined at each end of the circuit of the communication.

6. Mediation through signifying practices: the relation between the text and social experience is defined by the cultural mode of production of the former which is a response to the structures of the latter. Encoding and decoding are differentiable as embodying different forms of response.

7. Mediation through narrative: the relation between text and social experience is defined by the narrative structure of the former which provides, in its own narrative trajectory, possibilities for the resolution of experienced and unconscious social conflicts. Both encoding and decoding, albeit not necessarily equivalent, are constructed within the narrative through processes of identification.

*Discursive approaches:* culture produces not only the structures of experience but experience itself, which functions within social structures of domination; the question of encoding is one of the dominant forms of decoding.

8. Positioning the subject: the text creates a space within the experience it produces into which it inserts the reader as the subject or source of that experience, and thus, of its claim to be true knowledge of reality. The possibility of

different decodings points to the existence of different positions which may be taken up within the text.

9. Articulating the subject: the text is inserted into a network of other texts which define the particular ways in which it produces the meaningfulness or experience of particular social identities. Decoding is precisely this intertextual articulation understood as a struggle over the power to constitute experience.

10. Materializing power: the effects of the text are defined by its existence at a particular place within a network of other practices which it both enables and is enabled by. Neither the subject nor the

terms in which power is organized exist outside of this fabric of material effects.

My own biases are, I am sure, painfully obvious in the summary, if only by the trajectory of the presentation. Nevertheless, I want to emphasize that I think that all of these positions have made, and will continue to make, important contributions to our understanding of communications in the contemporary world. The point is not so much to choose between them, although one inevitably must do so, but to define new forms of alliance and cooperation amongst them.<sup>7</sup> □

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>I use the term "function" broadly to encompass any theory of the relationship between discourse and practice. Thus, it includes theories of meaning, effects and functions (understood in a narrower, 'functionalist' sense).

<sup>2</sup>These positions have developed in response to historical conditions and events, as well as through theoretical arguments. The positions or strategies presented here could be described in different frameworks, although the results would be, to differing degrees, not entirely equivalent. For example, Ellen Wartella has suggested that the distinction between classical, hermeneutic and discursive approaches can be seen in terms of the problem of the audience. Classical approaches tend to ignore the audience or assume that it is passive; hermeneutic approaches assume an active audience; and discursive approaches attempt to insert the audience into the very structures of cultural textuality. Similarly, Martin Allor has suggested that the three approaches can be distinguished on the basis of their differing views of determination: as a simple causal process, as a process of defining constraints and exerting pressures, or as "overdetermination" (see Slack, 1984). I could have also chosen to make the distinctions on the basis of competing theories of ideology.

<sup>3</sup>Of course, in the last analysis, a text must be evaluated in the different contexts within which it functions. Thus, one must acknowledge that Dorfman and Mattelart's work has an important place, not only in the development of a Marxist interpretation of popular culture, but also within the concrete political struggles of the Latin American left against the power of the United States. And despite what I take to be its methodological weaknesses, the analysis is still an insightful critique of Disney's texts.

<sup>4</sup>The problems with Adorno's critique are obvious. Adorno, like other modernists, sees art as a transcendental, autonomous activity capable of utopian criticism. His definition of art, however, is derived from a particular historical moment which is then generalized into a universal measure. Thus, the "standardization" of popular music is defined by comparison to the harmonic and structural complexity of the "canon." He ignores other normative measures—such as rhythmic complexity, timbre, texture, etc.—which may give different aesthetic conclusions. Further, he ignores the conventionality of all cultural forms—based in the specificity of signifying practices—which would make the question of individuality and creativity a problematic matter of degree and local judgment.

<sup>5</sup>I am not concerned here with the historical and theoretical adequacy of the economic theory that such positions use to describe specific media contexts. Obviously, such considerations should form an important part of the ongoing development and elaboration of the various "economisms."

<sup>6</sup>One other comparison may be useful. While post-structuralist theories such as Screen's tend to deny the very possibility of correspondences ("necessarily no correspondence") and Hall's denies both the

classical assumption of a "necessary correspondence" and the post-structuralist position (arguing for "no necessary correspondence or non-correspondence"—a "Marxism without guarantees"), Foucault makes the question an empirical one in each instance. Thus, there may be events which are, for all practical purposes, inserted into necessary correspondences. For example, a practice already embedded within an apparatus may be articulated in already defined ways. Note that there are significant methodological similarities between Foucault and the work of "Annales" school of history (Braudel, 1978/1981).

<sup>7</sup>Such alliances, motivated and shaped by the political contexts of both the discipline of communications research and the present State-formation, would require a critique of the various political practices that have become associated with the interpretive strategies presented here. For such alliances must avoid reproducing, at either the structural or practical level, the very forms of power they seek to challenge.

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